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Reading Inquiry 1

When reflecting on the influence of powerful institutions, it is evident that theories of Gramsci and Marx are especially relevant in the way we inherently understand culture and respond to power. Corporate actions, religion, and immigration are issues that demonstrate how civil and political influence the way power is exercised (Gramsci 260). American politics are often linked to institutions, thus creating a social environment where the economically privileged are heavily divided from the working class. Recent protests against companies like Amazon exemplify the process of revolt that Marx and Gramsci discuss in their ideologies of labor. Other countries like China face issues of lingering religious and historical issues that create a social divide among citizens. By looking at how theory influence actions on both the civil and political sides of society, a better picture of Marx and Gramsci theories can be understood in the context of inherent power in a particular culture.

Revolts against powerful institutions display how the public has the power to change society and its corresponding ideologies. Recent protests about Amazon moving headquarters into New York highlight Gramsci's point that power does not go unrivaled (260). The Amazon protests show not only that power does not go uncontested, but also shows an inherent power structure between citizens and large corporations. Amazon was offered \$1.5 billion in tax incentives by the State of New York to move its headquarters to Queens and create job opportunities (Taylor). This business deal represents the system of the ruling class where larger entities view workers as numbers, or as Marx noted, "the most wretched " commodities to

bargain over (30). This effect of objectification of men is explained by Marx' argument that the "increasing value of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion devaluation of the world of men." (31). This means that as capitalist values spread, like in the case of New York's interest of Amazon, labor produces not only commodities but also "produces itself and the worker as a commodity" while institutions spread "accumulation of capital in few hands" (30-31). Gramsci, like Marx, argues that this cycle of objectification of labor can only be broken through revolt (Gramsci 260). The structure that creates systematic oppression is facilitated through superstructural levels. Gramsci argues that these superstructural levels can be defined as a civil and political society where civil society is controlled by "'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society" and political society where "direct domination" of command exercised through the State (260). The concepts of hegemony and direct command demonstrate that the status quo has been socially constructed to reinforce the power of institutions over the public. When New Yorkers took to the streets protesting the new headquarters, they succeeded in defying the hegemonic forces and direct domination that had previously allowed monopolies to take over a neighborhood. The public succeeded in refuting the government's proposition to allow Amazon taxes breaks and deterred Amazon from building new Headquarters (Taylor). This modern context of power structures among different social and economic strata exemplify Gramsci's point that "Hegemonic force (that is to say one's political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one" (Gramsci 260). His insights emphasize action rather than a more abstract approach that Marx had previously laid out in his discussion of superstructural levels. The modern example of the public protests against Amazon and the New York government's shows that increased awareness and willingness to take a stand against power can create productive change. This

aspect of Gramsci's civil ideology sheds light on an institutional level but can also help understand religious and cultural hegemony.

Examining the balance of hegemony and direct command in the context of cultural practices sheds light on how tradition is upheld. Deeply historically rooted religions and cultures often lead individuals to act out of obligation and tradition rather than in fear of direct command. In many Asian countries, filial piety, or respect for one's elders and family, is a large part of a culture that guides one's actions (Pinghui). When I had the chance to stay with a family in Shanghai, I spoke with the daughter about how our cultures differed in the way laws or expectations were enforced. She explained that it wasn't a concrete set of laws, but everyone felt a duty to uphold this respect to uphold religious traditions and avoid be shunned from family and friends. This concept of duty speaks to the moral obligations we feel as citizens that do not always correlate with legal reparations. This sense of "duty", or presence of social hegemony, is facilitated by Gramsci's indication that "the intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government" (260). In this case, the intellectuals who instilled these beliefs were fellow family members, teachers, and friends who taught values of family and respect from a young age. However, as cultures evolve, intellectuals change their own views and fail to socially enforce cultural values. Hegemony facilitates internally maintaining the status quo, nonetheless, ideologies are more subject to change without the additional presence of a direct command from the state.

When individuals start to question values upheld by social hegemony, superstructural levels shift to reflect a heavier emphasis on direct domination from the State. There has been less of an emphasis on family values as the world has modernized, causing those who upheld traditional Confucian values in China to reevaluate how these traditions fit into modern society

(Pinghui). Marx's concepts of personally controlled perceptions can be applied to understand the reactions to evolving traditions. He argues that since "men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc" this means that they are active agents in determining their perceptions and therefore have the change the world around them (Marx 37). Given this ideology, individuals are capable of defying hegemony and instilling new values and traditions in society. When this began to occur in China, the political side of society felt obligated to step in to enforce a stricter direct command. China has recently made it a criminal offense to not follow specific guidelines relating to the 24 points of filial piety, as there has recently been less emphasis on traditionally important practices. The shifting balance of these superstructural domination tactics over time illustrates the necessity for both civil and political coercion to maintain the status quo. China's change of emphasis to direct commands from the State illustrate that "the functions in question are precisely organizational and connective" (Gramsci 260). When the organizational structure starts to break from the resistance of individuals in one area of coercion, the other tightens control to squelch the efforts to upset societal norms.

Social theory allows individuals to understand when their own morals and beliefs are violated by a system of power bigger than oneself. Gramsci's emphasis on theoretical and empirical problems of communism highlight the importance of self-criticism of common sense leads to "good sense" (261). This self-criticism leads individuals to be conscious of how and where hegemonic forces interfere in their life. This can be used to understand why different individuals react to exercised power in accordance with cultural norms. Applying Marx and Gramsci's ideologies to examples in America and China reveal the inherent power dynamics and conduct in all aspects of society. Systemized power can only be broken through rebellion and

revolt and these examples show situations of where a change in values or practices took place or are in the process of changing.

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